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ON PAGE A-1

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Italy Calls Pope Plot 'Act of War'

Evidence Points To Bulgarians, Defense Chief Says

By Loren Jenkins
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ROME, Dec. 20—Italian Defense Minister Lelio Lagorio today called the attempted assassination of Pope John Paul II last year an "act of war" and said it may have been a "precautionary and alternative solution to the invasion of Poland" directed by the Bulgarian secret services.

Basing his charges on recent interrogations of Mehmet Ali Agca, the convicted Turkish assailant in the attack on the pope, Lagorio told parliament that Italian counterespionage services have amassed evidence that appears to implicate Bulgaria.

Answering questions in parliament on the alleged "Bulgarian connection" that has captivated the Italian press in recent weeks, Lagorio also suggested that Bulgarians might have been linked to the Red Brigades' kidnapping of U.S. Army Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier in Verona a year ago. Dozier was freed six weeks after his capture when Italian police stormed the apartment where he was being held.

"Ali Agca's attack on the pope is to be considered a real act of war in a time of peace: a precautionary and alternative solution to the invasion of Poland," declared the defense minister, a leading Socialist in the coalition government of Christian Democratic Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani.

Stating that the Italian intelligence services had amassed dossiers and documents on eastern European involvement in terrorism, arms trafficking and drug smuggling in Italy

Lagorio said, "This merits the most deep concern about the Bulgarian connection and the international tensions it causes."

Lagorio's dramatic allegations came two days after a leading member of his Socialist Party charged that Foreign Minister Emilio Colombo, a Christian Democrat, had intentionally played down the evidence linking the pope's shooting to the Bulgarians. The charge revealed that there were differing opinions within the government over the validity of the evidence and that these differences could grow into a new political dispute within Fanfani's recently formed government.

Today Colombo admitted that there were "grave questions" about how the Bulgarian government used its diplomatic immunity as a cover for other activities. He said that there was also "an evident effort by the Bulgarian government to direct suspicions from themselves."

That was an apparent reference to a press conference held in Sofia Friday by Boyan Traikov, the head of the Bulgarian news agency, during which the Italian charges of Bulgarian involvement in the papal shooting were described as "foul" and "absurd."

Interior Minister Virginio Rognoni, also a Christian Democrat, said that investigations conducted by his ministry into the pope's shooting, internal subversion and arms trafficking had also implicated Bulgarian diplomats, intelligence agents and tourists.

Bulgaria is considered Moscow's most loyal East European satellite, so any accusations made against the Bulgarians also indirectly are accusations against the Soviet KGB.

The allegations of the "Bulgarian connection" that had long been talked about in private in some Italian intelligence circles, burst into the limelight Nov. 25 when Sergei Ivanov Antonov, the head of the Bulgarian airlines office in Rome, was arrested on a warrant issued by Judge Ilario Martella, the chief investigator in the case.

Since then Judge Martella has moved to lift the diplomatic immunity of two staff members of the Bulgarian Embassy here so that they too could be held for investigation. Both the Bulgarians, however, had already left Italy.

Defense Minister Lagorio revealed that Italian counterespionage services detected a sudden increase in coded messages between Sofia and Italy at the time of the pope's shooting as well as when Gen. Dozier was freed.

"This was interpreted as the result of inactive Bulgarian agents in Italy being activated," Lagorio explained. The extent to which the Bulgarian government has gone to try to "discredit" Agca's alleged prison confessions was another suspicious sign, the defense minister said.

Foreign Minister Colombo said that because of the allegations of Bulgarian activities here the Italian government had imposed new visa restrictions on Bulgarians seeking to travel to Italy and was also reviewing the size and function of the Bulgarian Embassy in Rome. Earlier this month the Italian ambassador to Sofia was recalled for consultations because of the growing rift between Italy and Bulgaria over the case.

Colombo insisted, however, that Italy would not act peremptorily on the case and would act only on the basis of solid facts.

The recent spate of Italian press reports on Agca's alleged connection with the Bulgarians assert that a Turkish terrorist with links to the Bulgarians, Oral Celik, helped Agca escape from prison in Turkey and make his way to Bulgaria in 1979. Agca, a right-wing extremist, had been in jail for the assassination of a prominent left-wing Turkish editor.

In Sofia, he met another Turk, Bekir Celenk, whom Italian police, according to the Italian newspapers, have linked to a vast arms and drug smuggling operation that stretches from Italy through the Balkans to Turkey.